

The Art of Healing: Celebrating 70 Years of the NHS

II Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10; Mark 6:1-13

Most of us here will not be able to remember a time when the NHS did not exist. It has become such a built-in part of the DNA of our country that it is impossible to think of the NHS not being there with us and for us. Personal health and wellbeing is not only a right for all, it is a fundamental characteristic of the civilised society we expect in this country. Free at point of entry, regardless of economic background or ability to pay, the protection of our National Health Service remains a key priority for the people of our country.

Scotland began changing the face of global medicine long before the National Health Service was founded. General anaesthetic, penicillin, the hypodermic syringe and the saline drip were just a few of our breakthroughs. In the last 70 years the pace has accelerated, with innovations revolutionising the way we treat illness. Scottish researchers have pioneered treatments that have helped save and improve millions of lives worldwide. From beta blockers to the Glasgow Coma Scale, Scotland's NHS has continued to pioneer new solutions.

According to Dr Harry Burns, a former chief medical officer for Scotland and professor of global public health at Strathclyde University, vaccination schemes have transformed Scotland. It is not just new treatments that have been pioneered in Scotland but new ways of investigating disease.

Prof Ian Donald saw ultrasound being used in a Clydeside shipyard and took it into his hospitals to observe foetuses as they developed. Now ultrasound scans are so ubiquitous they pass almost unremarked.

The NHS has controlled or wiped out the sorts of diseases that large numbers of people used to die from. But Professor Burns says Scotland has yet to cure the biggest killer of all - the one that does not show up in the statistics.

"Poverty is strongly associated with premature death. When I worked at the (Glasgow) Royal Infirmary you would get people coming in with alcohol-associated problems." But when he

advised them to stop drinking, they would ask why they should bother. Life was not good and drink was the only pleasure they got. This is a lifestyle which leads to what is now called "deaths of despair". "So it's about giving people a fulfilling life, giving people a sense of purpose and meaning in their lives," the professor says. "That will allow them to feel in control and want to be healthy. I think that is something for the political arena to think about." It is part of the art of healing.

Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, said last week: *"The NHS is an expression of our deepest shared values. Whatever its challenges, it's about us living out our concern for solidarity and the common good. It reflects God's concern for every person without exception. Today let's pray, give thanks and recommit our support."*ⁱ

The physical and mental health of our nation comes at a significant financial cost, but it remains one we are willing to pay. We offer our thanks to the women and men who have made the care and compassion of the NHS possible, inside and outside the organisation.

In this last year as I travelled around the country it has been a source of such encouragement to meet with health professionals right across the organisation who provide the kindness and care alongside the professional skill that provides so much substance to the fabric of our society. In acute wards, in home-care, in psychiatric units, in research facilities, in chaplaincy and spiritual care teams the level of dedication and commitment, very often sacrificial commitment, is incalculable. I have often wondered who cares for these carers whose long hours and work conditions are not rewarded the way they ought to be. That is a familiar argument, and an old one, and it needs to be made again and again to those who control the public purse. If we wish to continue to deliver world-beating healthcare from cradle to grave, those who provide it in our name and on our behalf need to be cared for too.

Recently I read of a person who was struck down by a mystery illness, that left him unable to work and permanently fatigued. He's had stronger periods and times of desperate weakness, but after many years he's more or less the same. A colleague asked him, "What do you really think has happened to you?" The man replied, "I've passed from the kingdom of the well to the

kingdom of the sick. I now live in a different world. People like me who have long-term, severe or terminal illness pass into a different realm, where time is different, and emotions are different, and intimacy is different, and food is different, and somehow even sound is different. I call it the kingdom of the sick.”ⁱⁱ

I wonder how many of you have spent time there, maybe with a family member, or maybe on your own. That space between wellness and sickness is fraught with anxiety and profound emotions. We take our health and well-being for granted until something happens, minor or major, and life is turned upside down. You feel you’re losing control and life has become broken in one or many ways.

It is in the kingdom of the sick that the community of the NHS and the caring of the NHS get on with their work. Whether the result is cure and wholeness restored, whether it is helping people with coping mechanisms for chronic physical or mental poor health, whether it is caring for those who are coming towards the end and need support and compassion, it is in the place of hurt and suffering and hopefulness that the NHS does its work. It is the art of healing.

As a person of faith, this speaks to me of what God is doing. Not waving a magic wand and making everything better all of the time, but getting alongside the person in need, whether they have faith or not, and accompanying them a little further along the way of life. It is what we read Jesus and His disciples doing: going out to where people were, and helping those who needed help by getting alongside them. It is in the getting alongside that the work of the NHS, at its best, and the Church today, at its best, overlap. I heard only last week of someone in our congregation who had gone through a tough time finding that whilst friends were wonderful, it was Church members, even ones who did not know the person very well, who not only stepped up to the mark, but stepped beyond it to do everything to help. That is the art of healing, and each one of us can be involved with that.

By getting alongside we are sometimes privileged to ‘touch’ the life of another. Maybe with medicine, maybe with counselling, maybe with the use of technology, but always with a ‘touch’

of healing which is essentially about saying to someone, from one person to another, 'I am here, I am with you; you are not alone.'

If the NHS, at its best, or the faith communities, at their best, or people of goodwill across our communities, at their best, are to be part of this process of healing our often broken society, I believe part of the process is learning to get alongside people, whatever their needs might be, and tell them, show them that we are with them.

A few months ago I was involved in writing some of the Church of Scotland's response to the Scottish Government's consultation about *A Connected Scotland*. If the Government, and all of society, are serious about tackling social isolation and loneliness and building stronger social connections, then part of any strategy involves the art of healing.

Healing the poor physical and poor mental health issues. Healing the addictions and the poverty issues. Healing the loneliness that comes to young people and older people. Healing the prejudices and hate crimes. Healing the rural and urban isolation caused by poor housing, poor transport and poor employment prospects. Healing the kingdom of the sick and helping people into the kingdom of the well.

It is what our founder, Jesus of Nazareth, was about. Creating community by creating touching places where none was excluded, none unwelcome, none so untouchable that the hand of kindness and healing and love could not reach out to comfort and give hope.

Our job in our generation is to attempt to leave our world in a better place than it was when we came into it. That was part of the vision that inspired the NHS. It is also the vision that inspires the Church.

My prayer is that our NHS, our communities, and our Church will continue to support those in greatest need and provide support wherever possible by connecting person to person. If we continue to work towards practicing the art of healing, we will go a great way to healing a whole society.

In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen

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- ⁱ Justin Welby, Tweet on 5th July 2018
ⁱⁱ Samuel Wells, Be Not Afraid, pps37ff